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"Voluntary social welfare"

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AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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VOLUNTARY SOCIAL WELFARE

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I THE CONTEXT

Those of us in the social welfare industry are concerned with the well being of people in our community - with standards of life and living, with people's access to quality care, with informal social supports, and with social relationships in general. Standards of life and levels of living are dependent on interventions and interactions of formal and informal kinds.

Our formal and informal structures attempt to deliver three types of things - tangible resources, effective services, and close companionship. In very crude terms the first, tangible resources is provided, in a social welfare sense, by government; the second, effective services by government and non-government agencies; and the third close companionship, informally by family, friends, neighbours and grassroots support systems. Today I don't want to deal centrally with tangible resources or close companionship, but rather with the service system and how social workers might respond to it.

Debates about the present and future operations of the welfare state revolve around arguments about the degree of state intervention and the public/private split. In the personal social services the division is threefold, or more appropriately two and a half fold. On the one hand some services are provided informally, by families and informal networks. On the other hand some are provided formally, by organised bureaucratic structures.

Of those provided bureaucratically there is a split - nothing neat, but rather a jagged tear - between those provided under statutory auspices, and those provided under voluntary auspices. The division is formal or informal - and if formal, statutory or non-statutory.

I have chosen to talk about non-statutory, or voluntary, social welfare for a number of reasons. First of all, non-government welfare organisations (NGWOs) play a pivotal role in the functioning of the modern welfare state. They have always played a significant role in welfare arrangements but the welfare state, it appears, has moved more quickly than many NGWOs, and consequently concepts of noblesse oblige which have underscored many voluntary activities in the past are not now as relevant as formerly. In the 1980s the scramble is for service provision, service quality, coverage, equity and resources. Second, the very complex relationship between NGWOs and governments has led to a great deal of theoretical work on the nature of the state, and the role, in relation to state functioning, of these bewildering and complex organisations. Third, many millions of people in Australia have dealings with NGWOs, and were it not for NGWOs many intolerable aspects of their lives would be magnified. In affluent Australia there are 3¼ million people who depend for their income on social security pensions and benefits - 21.3 per cent of the population. In addition there are some 600,000 children of these pensioners, plus a further 350,000 people who depend on Veterans' Affairs pensions for their livelihood. Many of these people and many

more suffer from a range of disabilities and are locked into various states of dependency, and some form of social care is required. The means of dealing with the patterns of dependency vary considerably and out of this has emerged a welfare mishmash. Statutory systems, voluntary systems and informal systems combine in a variety of ways to meet the burgeoning pattern of need that is evident within Australia. If one looks at all the indicators around us we can also see that we are on the verge of an explosion of social care, although that is a separate topic in itself, but highly relevant in the argument I plan to unfold. Fourth, the students which you as social work educators work with, are going to spend most of their professional lives either in NGWOs, or dealing with NGWOs in some way. It is important then, for them to have a thorough grasp of the structure of NGWOs, of how they fit into the modern welfare state, of why they do what they do, what they do, how they do it, whom they do it to (or with) and where they do it. Such knowledge will greatly enhance their understanding of their work environment, and hopefully make more pertinent their practice.

Thus it is for operational, theoretical, practical and educational reasons that I want to talk today about voluntary social welfare.

II NON GOVERNMENT WELFARE

The welfare industry is one of the largest in our society. In dollar terms alone, annual statutory social welfare expenditure would buy Australia's top seven companies, BHP, CRA, MIM, Westpac, CSR, Comalco and the ANZ Banking Group - and there would still be some change! The big bucks are in income support but there are still about 25,000 people employed in statutory welfare departments in Australia. Only a few of these are social workers.

There are many more people employed in NGWOs than in statutory welfare departments. In a long-running research project in the Social Welfare Research Centre we have identified somewhere between 25,000 and 48,000 non-government welfare organisations in Australia. 60 per cent of these have paid staff and 80 per cent of these have volunteers. Those with paid staff have a mean number of 34 staff per organisation and a median of 6. This large difference between mean and median indicates that a small number of organisations have very very large numbers of paid staff. There are approximately 27 per cent more part time staff than full time staff. These numbers however are overwhelmed by the number of volunteers in Australian NGWOs. We have estimated that 10 to 13 per cent of the adult population is involved in volunteer welfare activity. This totals between 1 and 1.5 million people, who on average spend four hours per week in volunteer work.

Our study is an attempt to develop a classification of NGWOs and an understanding of their targets, and their resources (both income and staff). From a national sample we identified 46 functional categories which we have grouped into 13 broad goal areas. We have indentified 45 client groups, broken into 7 target areas e.g. gender, life stage, ethnicity, income, personal relationships, etc. We have 6 objective roles and 4 assigned roles e.g. service provision, commitment to social change, maintenance and reproduction of the social order, and self-help. We have period of foundation (half of the agencies came into existence in the last 10 years), and location by 7 variables describing area served, from neighbourhood to the whole nation, though mostly we grouped the data by State, or nationally. We have crosstabbed each of these by each other and generated a bunch of tables that took us two years to read. That was just the start. We then took income size and income source and crosstabbed against each other and against all the other variables mentioned so far. For example we have data on high income and low income organisations and on what proportions of income they get from government (3 levels), external sources (parent organisations, private firms, etc) and internal sources (fees, investments, donations, membership, fundraising). We also have personnel data, i.e. on paid staff and volunteers, full time and part time staff as well as management board data. All of this is crosstabbed against everything else. As you can appreciate the superabundance of data is thoroughly overwhelming, and it would not be appropriate now to start reeling off numbers. Instead I want to touch on some contextual and theoretical issues

Social service provision in Australia (and in all other western nations) would collapse were it not for the activities of NGWOs. From the earliest days in colonial Australia 'charitable organisations' have been part of the social welfare system. Also from the earliest days organisations have depended, in varying degrees, on public funds. The many tens of thousand of organisations today perform a wide variety of functions. Some provide services to individuals; some provide material aid; some are involved in social action; some support the state and provide their wares as a supplement; others see themselves as opponents to the mainline functions of state welfare and see themselves as an alternative to the state; some try to fit in between, and act as pressure groups in an attempt to have the state allocate resources for additional, better or different provisions. While many NGWOs rely on government for funding, government relies on NGWOs for service provision, and consequently an uneasy partnership has developed over the years.

It is often assumed that NGWOs comprise a 'non-government welfare sector'. Even leaving aside theoretical issues, it would be trite to work on the basis that the many tens of thousands of NGWOs in Australia have sufficient in common for them to be assumed to form a sector. What they appear to have in common is that they are organisations outside the strict statutory framework, formed with some apparent commitment to improving the quality of life of their clientele.

However, while some have a limited and self selected clientele, others have wide ranging targets; some provide services, some pressure other organisations to provide services; while some charge fees for their services, others do not; some see themselves as activists for social change, some see themselves as protecting and enhancing the status quo; some have long traditions and endure the fluctuations in social, economic and political conditions, others are extremely vulnerable to change and their potential lifespan is limited; some are complex organisations with highly structured bureaucracies, others consist of a handful of enthusiastic activists/helpers; some are potent political forces consisting of people who are politically well connected and who can influence the allocation of public funds, others have no political muscle; some provide services to clients who fall through the statutory net or to clients for whom government can receive no credit, others provide services to the same clientele that government serves, others provide no services; some act as agents for government; some are dreadfully condescending to their clientele, others are warm and humane; some receive government funding under one or more of the various funding mechanisms, others receive no funding at all.

From a social work perspective there are obvious and immediate questions about how the resources available can be harnessed to meet needs which can be identified, and how the

process can be managed professionally and equitably, and in a caring manner. This is difficult, particularly when one notes that the NGWOs perform dozens of functions, deal with all sorts of target groups, have widely differing resources, and play numerous and diverse roles.

The largest single function performed by NGWOs in Australia is that of providing accommodation (14.5 per cent of NGWOs). Rarely does this activity permit agencies to be very innovative, nor to experiment and develop new projects and techniques (although the potential is there). Although program analyses are not part of our present project, other research dealing with residential care for children, elderly people and handicapped people indicates that the functions in question can be and are performed by either government or NGWOs with very little difference in emphasis, performance or direction. NGWOs in this category incidentally, are those with the largest budgets.

The second largest functional grouping in Australia is of NGWOs involved in collective action such as advocacy for group rights, public education, self help, or community based organisations. NGWOs may serve as critic, and lobby governments to improve or extend services or service concepts; to some extent they may be valuable in defending government services against anti-government and anti-spending sentiments. These agencies are heavily involved in monitoring, criticising

and prodding government and use ad hoc coalitions, citizens' committees, media outlets and a wide range of lobbying and political tactics. The functions performed by these groups would not be performed by governments, and thus a clear division is obvious and noticeable. It is of interest to note that these NGWOs have very low budgets and are among the poorest.

III THEORETICAL ISSUES

In trying to explain this profusion of activity there has been, in the absence of substantial empirical work, a great deal of theorising, and this has been informed largely by ideological considerations. Numerous attempts have been made to explain the existence and proliferation of NGWOs.

One version, commonly being debated in the U.K. at present is of welfare pluralism. It sees the existence of NGWOs as part of an important statutory/non statutory partnership, a part of what has been called a mixed economy of welfare. The theoretical material talks about diversity, efficiency, freedom of choice, best use of resources, maximising the potential of the community. This view is challenged by writers on the left who see the notion of a mixed economy of welfare as a means of increasing privatization, and as leading to an increase in the reliance on unpaid caring activities within the informal sector — activities borne particularly by women.

Support for voluntary action has become a major part of the platforms and practices of conservative governments throughout the world. Not to be outdone, many social democratic parties also support voluntary action. This support from across the political spectrum draws the venom of writers on the left. Cora Baldock for example refers to the voluntary sector as an agent of the state in the process of accumulation and legitimisation. She argues that the provision of welfare services through the voluntary sector appears to further the process of capital accumulation because the services provided by NGWOs are cheaper and thus there is a freeing of government monies for other activities that more directly enhance capital accumulation. Other writers talk about the voluntary sector as bridging the public and private domains and providing a gap-filling function which expands to a supplemental function which gives the state an opportunity to focus on other activities and leave the welfare of the people to a haphazard and incremental service system.

Are NGWOs doing the state's task? Are they agents of the state? Are they "outside the state" or part of the state?

The arguments on both the left and the right generally have not been subject to empirical verification and consequently attempts to theorise the sector are fairly hypothetical. In our research we have come to the conclusion that NGWOs are important to government: as a key vehicle for implementation of public policy; as an information network; as a mediation

of social issues into proper channels; and as a cheaper and more flexible avenue than alternatives — government itself or the market. Funding is substantial and funding by government may take place perhaps because government has a vision of society; perhaps because government has no vision but is happy to respond to suggestions; or perhaps because government believes services provided by NGWOs are cheaper.

IV CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Whatever theoretical issues there are to debate the reality is that NGWOs exist in abundance and carry the social service system on their backs. Rather than explore why they exist it might be more profitable to examine conceptual issues about their functioning and style. In many cases these conceptualisations have been examined empirically.

Sheila Kamerman has conceptualised three types of voluntary agency models, first she talks about the "extension ladder" model where the public sector is responsible for a minimum level of provision for all and the private sector provides supplementary assistance. A second model is the "parallel bars" model in which both statutory and non-statutory do much the same sort of thing. The third the "public agent" model is where a substantial amount of public funds is channeled into the non-statutory sector through public purchase of services or goods via contractual arrangements or through direct grants or subsidies to NGWOs. In this model the public sector shapes the private

sector by means of governmental regulation.

Ralph Kramer has spent almost 30 years studying non-government welfare agencies and has identified a number of roles they may play. First, as vanguard, the purpose of the voluntary agency is to innovate, pioneer, experiment, and demonstrate programs, some of which may eventually be taken over by government. Second, as improver or advocate, the agency is expected to serve as a critic, watchdog, or gadfly as it pressures a governmental body to extend, improve or establish needed services. Third, as value guardian of voluntaristic, particularistic, and sectarian values, a voluntary agency is expected to promote citizen participation, to develop leadership, and to protect the special interests of social, religious, cultural, or other minority groups. Fourth, as service provider, the voluntary agency delivers certain services it has selected, some of which may be a public responsibility that government is unable, is unwilling to provide either, fully or partially. An NGWO may be used by government as a primary service provider, an alternative to or a substitute for government service. From his empirical work Kramer concluded that NGWOs could not be generally described as pioneering, but were quite specialised. Second, although advocacy had been proposed as a primary function of many NGWOs, they derived most of their influence and legitimacy as service providers rather than advocates. Third, volunteerism was not a distinguishing and unique characteristic of NGWOs, for volunteerism is also found in and promoted by government organisations. A more unique contribution of NGWOs

claims Kramer, is consumerism as expressed in self help and mutual aid organisations. In general, Kramer believes the most pervasive role for NGWOs is that of a basic service provider. To a large extent our empirical work in the SWRC bears out his conclusions.

In the overseas literature a number of vulnerabilities of NGWOs have been identified. In summary they are: (i) institutionalisation — a 'creeping formalisation' which often results in rigidity, inertia, insularity and resistance to change; (ii) goal deflection — in which the development of an NGWO's purpose is displaced by the pressures of organisational survival (e.g. social advocacy being eroded by the need for fund-raising and system maintenance); (iii) minority rule — in that many agencies are governed by a 'self-selected and self-perpetuating' group, unrepresentative of the organisation's workers and clients, often leading to problems of unresponsiveness, narrowness of focus, inflexibility and resistance to change; and (iv) ineffectuality — including inefficiency, insularity, low accountability, 'a casual, muddling and bumbling style of operation' and other administrative deficiencies arising from a 'charity market' context of independence and laissez-faire.

As we go through our Australian data we have found evidence of the first three of these — institutionalisation, goal deflection, and minority rule but not of the fourth, ineffectuality. We did not do any evaluative work which would allow us to test for ineffectuality.

These vulnerabilities can be overcome in three ways — if NGWOs strive: (i) to become more democratic, seeking broader and more diverse constituencies, more participatory structures and processes to supply new priorities and issues, and play a more active part in the monitoring and criticism of public services; (ii) to develop greater accountability, conceiving of themselves as property of the community and introduce better procedures for public disclosure and more effective information systems; and (iii) to develop more administrative rationality by reviewing goals, purpose and capacities and by designing their structures and functions to meet these more effectively and appropriately.

NGWOs divide into those which are part of our society's dominant power structure and those which are essentially powerless. The former have been engaged in their activities for a long time and because of their socio-political position have strong expectations of continuing funding, and they experience few constraints. A different pattern obtains for those community oriented NGWOs, particularly those which work from an oppositional stance and concern themselves with self-help, consumerism, information and advocacy. The Australian welfare state is faced with issues, not of survival, but of alliance. Which groups will combine together to form a protective support for the vulnerable; which coalitions will strive for tax fairness and interference into market mechanisms, so that inequality is not magnified; which coalitions will fight for the maintenance and improvement of benefits to ensure

that the politics of exclusion is not directed at those with the fewest political resources; which coalitions will ensure that a reasonable balance be struck and maintained between the private and public spheres of allocation? These are the political issues which will shape the future of social welfare.

V SOCIAL WORK ISSUES

Having outlined a range of ideas about NGWOs it is quite apparent that they are of fundamental importance in our welfare system and in our power structures. They also fit somewhere between the provision of tangible resources and close companionship, somewhere between the state and the family. There are obviously many views and perspectives about the role and functioning of NGWOs and it seems appropriate to try to re-orient the discussion to the role of social workers as they relate to NGWOs.

Social workers are potent stimulants in our society. They are most effective when they can make skilled diagnoses of situations requiring intervention and when they can identify and harness the resources necessary for the intervention. Successful social workers are catalysts, not protectors or controllers. As such it is crucial that they understand the socio-political systems within which they work.

The three main sectors, the statutory sector, the so

called voluntary sector and the informal sector together have different things to deliver, and as I have stressed, it is important for social workers to be able to understand the strengths and weaknesses, the potential contributions and potential deficiencies of relying on each of these three sectors.

The students you teach will find their futures inextricably linked with NGWOs, and how they shape up will depend very much on their knowledge base — theoretical, practical and political. They will operate within a public welfare system which is under attack — one in which the relationship between statutory, commercial, voluntary and informal is very much in a state of flux. While the public sector is being squeezed, to plan our welfare futures primarily on the basis of dominant informal or voluntary services is positively negligent. It is important that your students are not conned into believing that informal caring systems are the way through our looming social care explosion.

Informal care patterns are most affected by changes in female domestic and labour roles, and this requires careful policy consideration. Further, it is naive to assume that all people have a caring social network which they can call upon if necessary, or that most people are happy to intervene informally in the difficulties of others. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that the backbone of the formal social services, volunteers, will always be available to provide satisfactorily.

In order to deal with dependencies that are likely to be transitory and/or chronic, a continuum of care exists, ranging from self, through primary groups, extended families, neighbourhoods and formally organised services both non-statutory and statutory. While care can be offered and delivered under many auspices at many levels, only government is usually able to have a complete overview of needs, skills, resources; and only government is likely to have the authority to plan effectively. But the pattern in Australia is that most of the service activity is undertaken by NGWOs and informal networks, and there are obvious linkages needed in integrating policy and services. It is here that the role of the professional is critical.

Not all needs it must be noted, can be met by social provision and no social welfare system can function satisfactorily without professional back-up. Professional social workers, it must be remembered, are public servants, whether they operate in the statutory or non-statutory sector and their ability to withstand the many criticisms of the profession will be enhanced if they work from a stronger knowledge base. Social work operates in the most real of real world situations and knowledge of social processes and social linkages is vital. The future quality of social provision will be enhanced when social workers are skilfully able to translate these real-world individual cases and situations into social issues and issues of policy.

This comes from good social theory and thoughtful

practice. If their knowledge and practice bases are sound, professional social workers will be best able to determine whether certain needs require supportive, supplementary, or substitutive services. By working in formal organisations, social workers must demonstrate integrative planning capacities, not only so that they can match resources to needs among their clientele, but also relate these to major resource allocation decisions.

There is enormous potential for social workers to develop effective and appropriate inter-relationships between the three care systems. The statutory sector has the resources and the overall planning capacity, and the non-statutory sector must co-operate in planning and delivery, for left to its own resources, it will be able to deliver only residual services. Professional social workers have a key role in developing and sustaining the working linkages between these two sectors, and also to understand, but not aggravate informal tending systems.

The importance of social work activity is to understand the range of supports that takes place within our community and to understand the capacity of the various service providing sectors to provide what service they can. As social work educators your task is to make sure that your students are well equipped to meet these formidable challenges.